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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the ways in which skilled readers detect ironic subtexts in nonfiction prose, a study examined strategies used by readers to infer writers' aims in ironic discourse and compared these strategies with those revealed by other recent reading process studies. Subjects, six graduate students and five college freshmen, were asked to read aloud and comment on five short texts, some of which were ironic. A coding scheme was developed to analyze the reading protocols of three graduate students and three freshmen. The protocol analysis revealed several patterns of responses that were similar to those found by other reading studies. First, approximately half of the subjects' comments were attempts to interpret the texts--most of this interaction with the texts was local, addressing the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, and passages. Second, while the freshman subjects used most of the same strategies as the graduate students, they made fewer and a smaller variety of comments overall. Third, there were marked differences between the reading stances of individual readers, particularly among the freshmen. Finally, findings showed that one major way in which readers detected irony was by recognizing clues in particular features of the text, such as a humorous or sarcastic tone in a passage. (Eleven references are included. One text used in the study is appended.) (JD)

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READERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WRITERS' AIMS
IN IRONIC DISCOURSE

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Readers' Perceptions of Writers' Aims in Ironic Discourse

Abstract. This study looked at the strategies readers use to infer writers' aims in ironic discourse. Six graduate students and five freshmen were asked to read and comment on five short texts, some of which were ironic. A coding scheme was developed to analyze the reading protocols of three graduate students and three freshmen. The protocol analysis illustrated some differences in the way graduate students and freshmen read, some variety among individual readers in each group, and some differences in the way each of the five texts was read. The study describes how readers inferred irony in the texts, and compares the reading strategies they used with strategies revealed by other recent studies of reading processes.

There is a sense in which all discourse is persuasive, aiming to influence readers in one way or another--to galvanize them into action, perhaps, or merely to arouse and maintain their interest in a story. However, when discourse is classified, writing which tries to influence readers by argument is usually contrasted with writing which appears to convey information without trying to influence readers' use of the information. This distinction can be found in the discourse schemes of James Kinneavy (1971) and James Britton et al (1975), whose categories are based on the intent of the writer as perceived by readers.

In reality, however, as Kinneavy and Britton recognize, discourse categories overlap and texts are seldom exemplars of a single discourse type. The purpose of this study was to investigate the strategies readers use to determine writers' aims in texts which fall between the categories of informative, scientific, and persuasive discourse on Kinneavy's scheme, and between informative and conative discourse on Britton's. Some discourse that falls between these categories is ambiguous: it suggests value judgments without stating them. It may present information that appears heavy with unstated implications, or it may declare one message but imply another. In other words, this study looked at readers' perceptions of writers' aims in ironic discourse--writing which assumes active readers who are prepared to play the game of constructing a tacit subtext in addition to

constructing meaning in the given, surface text.

There is a growing body of research which studies reading as it takes place, analyzing protocols of subjects thinking aloud while reading. Flower, Hayes, & Swarts (1983) have looked at the way people read and try to make sense of a Federal regulation. They analyzed moments when readers encountered difficulties, and found that their three, skilled, adult readers often made "scenario statements" dramatizing the regulation: they rehearsed its meaning by applying it to hypothetical situations. Flower (1984) reports that readers "read rhetorically," constructing scenarios or simulations of what might be taking place in the text in order to maintain a critical distance from the text, to resolve conflicts in their interpretation of it, and to build a coherent structure representing the writer's intentions. Tierney et al. (in press) found readers actively composing meaning as they read a set of instructions, making inferences about the author's purpose.

Scardamalia & Bereiter (1984) analyzed reading protocols to learn how twelve- and sixteen-year-olds coped with logical inconsistencies in texts. They found that the younger readers tended to interpret individual statements, comparing them with their own world knowledge but seldom relating them to the rest of the text. Older subjects made more "macrointerpretations," making connections between individual statements or interpreting them in the context of the whole composition.

Collins, Brown & Larkin (1980) describe reading as a model-building inference process. They conclude that readers overcome comprehension difficulties by considering various schemata that might explain the text, looking for one which satisfies the given constraints by answering all the reader's questions.

Waern (1980) analyzed the reading protocols of first-year psychology students and identified four major mental operations: "reading text," "evoking previous knowledge," "interpreting," and "comparing." Olson, Mack & Duffy (1981) gave their subjects well-formed and ill-formed stories and inductive arguments. Subjects invoked their knowledge of discourse conventions, as well as their general knowledge, to help them understand the texts.

Viewed together, these studies agree on several points, suggesting some generalizations that might be made about common reading processes. We can say that skilled readers seem to interact with the writer as they read a text: they build a model of the writer's persona and intentions, or gist, by describing or inferring what they see happening in the text. They consider new details in the light of their current model of the text's meaning, revising the model as they receive new information which conflicts with it. They reread passages they have difficulty understanding, and they make connections and draw conclusions by comparing different parts of the text. They also draw on their own experience and

knowledge of the world and familiar schemata to classify the text in relation to their store of prior knowledge, and they draw on what they know about the conventions of written discourse to track the movement of the text and predict where it will lead.

Younger, less skilled readers seem not to employ such a complex range of strategies. They less frequently backtrack and review text already read, and their interpretation tends to be more atomistic, concentrating on individual details. They do not spin as many threads between these details, and the result is often a less coherent, less elaborate web of meaning for the whole text.

The Study

The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate skilled readers' use of the strategies like those summarized above to infer writers' aims in ironic texts, in which the writer's intent is concealed or disguised. In these texts the writer takes a stance and presents an opinion or judgment on the subject but stops short of declaring this opinion, relying instead on readers' ability to infer the ironic subtext. More specifically, the study set out to observe the kind and proportion of strategies used by skilled readers on such texts, and to look for differences between the reading processes of more and less experienced readers.

Subjects

Eleven subjects took part in the study. Five of the subjects had just graduated from high school and were about to enter four-year universities. (These subjects will be referred to as freshmen.) The other six subjects were graduate students in a Department of Literature; they had had some training in composition theory, but were unfamiliar with the aims of the study. Subjects were chosen on the basis of their availability and willingness to participate.

Texts

Subjects in the study were given five texts to read, each of about 750 words. Two of the texts were whole articles, the other three the beginnings of longer articles. Together, the five texts were chosen to represent authorial opinion in varying degrees of prominence. Below are brief descriptions of the texts, together with the titles used to identify them in the study.

"Housewife." This passage, which opens Marya Mannes' essay, "Packaged Deception," is characterized by a rhythmic, insistent rhetoric. The voice is strident, sometimes shrill, the author driving home her message with rhetorical questions. She tries through her own example to stir up the moral indignation of consumers against manufacturers who mislead them. Her thesis appears at the end of her third paragraph.

"Oranges." Taken from John McPhee's extended essay on oranges, this passage was chosen as an example of discourse seeking to inform but not to present a strong opinion on the information. McPhee shares with readers some facts and stories about the fruit--a sampling of botany, history, geography, and lore. The passage may be read as a celebration of oranges, particularly the Washington Navel, but McPhee refrains from passing judgment on the information he provides. For instance, in describing California's and Florida's traditional rivalry over oranges, he presents both sides and remains neutral.

"Bake-Off." This text comprised the opening paragraphs of Nora Ephron's essay, "Baking Off," an eye-witness account of a Pillsbury Bake-Off in Beverly Hills. Ephron's tone is almost deadpan, but behind her posture as a slightly bewildered visitor "telling it like it was," she seems to poke fun at Pillsbury and the middle class American ritual it promotes. Her sense of the absurdity of the event emerges from her catalogues of details and the reported actions of the characters. Ephron's attitude in this part of her essay appears ambivalent, leaving readers to decide for themselves how much sympathy she has for her subjects.

"Workaholic." One of the two complete texts used in the study, this short essay by Ellen Goodman, entitled "The Company Man," describes how a corporate executive works himself to death. Telling the story without editorial comment, Goodman provides readers with details from which we can infer the irony and tragedy of the man's death. She seems to present the story as a typical example of work destroying family values, a pattern of behavior which she shows repeating itself in one of the dead man's sons, and in the company president's inquiries about a successor.

"Fairness." This piece by Michael Cook, an elementary school counselor, was the other complete text used in the study. It appeared in the Opinion section of the Los Angeles Times, under the title, "How To Nail Down a Perfectly Fair Platform." At the time when the study was conducted, it was topical, since it reflected on the 1984 election campaigns. By listing the Herculean labors and often contradictory goals which a government would have to achieve to be perfectly fair, Cook creates a sarcastic tone and implies that fairness is a dubious campaign promise. (This text is reproduced in the appendix.)

Procedures

The data gathered for this study consisted of audiotaped protocols of subjects reading and commenting on the five texts and writing about them. The tapes were transcribed by a typist, then coded and analyzed.

Subjects were asked to read the five texts aloud, verbalizing their reactions to them as they read, and then to write a short, rough draft explaining what they thought was the writer's purpose in each text and how the five texts were different and alike. The writing task was designed to give a purpose to the reading. Subjects were invited to read the texts in any order and to reread them as often as they liked.

Each subject was given some training in making a reading protocol, hearing a taped sample of reading and writing protocols and then making a practice reading protocol under the experimenter's guidance. Subjects were then left alone to record the protocols, the experimenter returning only to change the audiocassettes. When transcribed with double-spacing, the protocols for the five texts ranged in length from twenty-two to forty-five pages.

Data analysis

Because subjects' passages of commentary in the protocols were often fragmentary, elliptical, stuttering, or revised in mid-utterance, they were divided into episodic rather than syntactic units for coding. An episodic unit, marked by

parentheses on the protocol transcript, could be as short as a single word or as long as half page, lasting for as long as the subject continued to make the same kind of comment. This coding system therefore shows the frequency of each kind of comment, but not the length of each individual comment.

Comments were classified either as metastatements or content statements. Metastatements were any statements referring to the task environment or the reading process, rather than to the content of the texts (e.g. "O.K., I'm going to go on to the next piece now"). Metastatements were discarded from the analysis.

Content statements were classified into six function categories--QUERY, OBSERVE, INFER, PREDICT, EVALUATE, and COMPARE--indicated on the transcripts by a letter code. Definitions and examples of each function appear below:

QUERY (Q). Expressions of confusion, uncertainty, requests for explanation or further information:

"What does she mean by that?"

"Why? Why is it the most beautiful?"

OBSERVE (O). Expressions of interest, surprise, remarks identifying or calling attention to features of the text:

"That's an interesting, luminous detail"

"Interesting switch in tense here"

PREDICT (P). Comments anticipating what the text would do:

"There's going to be some sort of interesting little twist. There's got to be a but, here, something"

"Hmm. Uh-oh. This looks like a political one. This ought to raise my dander up quite a bit"

INFER (I). Comments not merely pointing to something visible in the text but explaining, enlarging, interpreting, paraphrasing, supplying missing information, drawing conclusions, etc.:

"Mmm, kind of cynical overtone there, hmhm"

"I have a feeling that the whole idea of this essay is to make me angry"

EVALUATE (E). Comments agreeing or arguing with the text, praising or criticizing the writer's rhetorical choices or achievements:

"Well, maybe he pays what he thinks they're worth in the sense of buying a book, but we don't pay for ideas. We don't- writers don't sell words and ideas. That's kind of fallacious"

"This is good - this person can write"

COMPARE (CT, CK). Comments making connections between a passage or whole text and something it has brought to mind. Comparisons were subdivided into two kinds:

COMPARE TEXT (CT). Comments recalling earlier passages within the same text, other texts in the study, or texts read at some earlier date:

"This has a kind of Bombeckian flavor to it--again this is sort of magazine writing or newspaper writing"

"Again, this kind of reportage, in this one like in the first piece, kind of - but this one seems to have more of a curious style"

COMPARE KNOWLEDGE (CK). Comments recalling non-literary memories--ideas, people, events, or things brought to mind by the text:

"Hm, that's when I got married"

"It's just like a political- like Reagan's trip to China"

In addition to these single-function categories, there were several combined categories for comments which appeared to have an ambiguous function or more than one function:

INFER/QUERY (I/Q). Tentative inferences, or inferences phrased as questions:

"So I'm to understand it does get down to forty, and below?"

"Maybe that's what the view that everyone that - maybe there were so many different people in the obituary this was just a type of person - I don't know"

EVALUATE/QUERY (E/Q). Critical questions or challenges to the logic of the text, expressions of confusion that blamed the text:

"That makes no sense"

"Um, I don't- I still, like, I'm having some conflicts here about how this can be done"

EVALUATE/COMPARE (E/CT, E/CK). Critical comparisons of the text with something else, either literary or non-literary:

"It begins- the paragraphs right away are thicker . . . um and it seems to be more um more desirable, to read, thicker and more uh uh denser kind of uh thought and depth and maybe, um more written than reported" (E/CT, comparing text just begun with text just read)

"Now this sort of, um - evokes in me the whole ethic, work ethic wh- that I think I don't quite believe in. It sounds like a good description of a typical example of something I wouldn't want up- end up doing, and maybe that's why I'm in academia right now"

As well as a letter code for their function, content statements were given a numerical code for their subject--the element of the text to which they referred: PASSAGE CONTENT (1), RHETORICAL FEATURE (2), TONE (3), STRUCTURE (4), WHOLE TEXT (5), or AUTHOR (6). Here is an example of a typical coded comment as it appeared in the transcript of a protocol

(the underlined passages indicate the subject reading from the text):

It seems that at least half of the 100 finalists in the Bake-It-Easy Bake-Off (^{I3}O.K., this is whimsical, and ironic - the tone) had brought something with them--their own sausages, their own pie pans, their own apples.

The comment interrupting the reading passage was coded as an inference ("I") about the tone ("3") of the writing. A second rater was able to achieve an average of 73% agreement with the experimenter using this coding scheme, which was used to analyze the protocols of three graduate students and three freshmen.

Findings

Response Patterns of Graduate Students and Freshmen

Table 1 shows the total number of comments made by three graduate students and three freshmen in each function and subject category, and the number of comments in each category as a percentage of the total number of comments made (percentages rounded to the nearest tenth of one percent). This table suggests some differences in the patterns of response by graduate students and freshmen. The most common functions of both groups' comments were to infer and to evaluate. However, graduate students' comments had a somewhat wider variety of functions, drawing on their greater experience with text to make more literary comparisons

(COMPARE TEXT and EVAL./COMPARE TEXT), whereas the freshmen tended to relate the texts they were reading to their personal experience or prior knowledge about the subject, rather than to other texts.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

The figures in Table 1 for the distribution of comments across subject categories suggest a similar pattern.

Graduate students and freshmen alike addressed most of their comments to the content of local passages in the texts, and the two groups had similar totals for this subject category.

However, the 325 comments which the freshmen addressed to local passage content accounted for nearly three quarters of their total number of comments, while the 340 comments made in the same category by graduate students accounted for only half their total number of comments. The rest of the graduate students' comments were spread across the other five categories, referring to rhetorical features, tone, structure, whole text, and author. In other words, the graduate students demonstrated a greater repertoire of comments on the texts than the freshmen.

(Insert Table 2 about here)

Response Patterns of Individual Readers

While Table 1 suggests the kind of broad differences we might expect to find between the reading processes of graduate students and freshmen, it does not reflect differences in the

patterns of response that appeared among individual readers within each group. They adopted different reading stances, as the figures in Table 2 indicate. For example, one graduate student, Greta, made thirty-five comments comparing the text she was reading with her prior knowledge, whereas the other two graduate students, Katie and Tim, made only sixteen comments each in this category. Katie made fewer queries than Tim or Greta as she read the texts, and was slightly more critical of the texts. Also, although Table 2 does not show it, her evaluative comments were spread across the range of subject categories, rather than being concentrated on the content of local passages as were Tim's and Greta's. Katie seemed aware of this pattern in her response, as she remarks in this metastatement occurring early in her protocol:

"Isn't it amazing how I'm being so evaluative of the writing rather than of what the person is saying? Hm.

Do I read like that all the time, I wonder, when I read anything? Maybe I do. Maybe that's because I'm a writer. Hm, that's troubling, though. I wonder when I read students' papers: am I always- I think I listen to what they're saying. I think I look at the content. Good God, I hope so!

There was even greater disparity among the freshmen in their patterns of commentary. Lynn made many more COMPARE KNOWLEDGE comments than Ulla or Penny, digressing frequently to mention things which the text brought to mind. She was

also a more aggressive reader than the other two, voicing more queries and registering far more evaluative comments than Penny or Ulla. There is a particularly noticeable disparity between the number of evaluative comments made by Lynn (79) and Ulla (10). Ulla practically never took issue with the texts. She devoted her attention instead to understanding what the writer was trying to say. Typically she would read a passage, then pause to paraphrase or summarize it, beginning with a phrase like "so I guess what he's saying here is . . ."

Unlike those of Ulla or Lynn, Penny's comments were as evenly spread across the categories as the graduate students' comments, and she made almost as many comments about whole texts as about passages within them. When analyzing the protocols, it was often hard to tell if a comment referred to the whole text or to the passage just read, but while Ulla tended to pause and summarize the passage she had just finished, Penny's comments suggested a more global perspective on the purpose of the text. A greater proportion of her comments were directed at the writer's tone, and she was the only one among the freshmen to discuss the structure of the texts--praising or criticizing the writers on the way they had begun or ended the texts, for instance. In the distribution of her comments across the function and subject categories, she more nearly resembled the graduate students than her peers, except that she compared the texts with other texts, authors, and genres less often than the graduate students did.

(Insert Table 3 about here)

Response Patterns for Individual Texts

Tables 1 and 2 show differences in the patterns of response between graduate students and freshmen, and between individual readers. Table 3 shows the distribution of comments in each function category across the five texts. While not conclusive, the figures on this table are suggestive of some patterns which intuition would support. For instance, both graduate students and freshmen responded with the most EVALUATE comments to the "Housewife" and "Fairness" texts. These were the most tendentious, provocative pieces in the set, and readers argued back. Freshmen responded to the "Fairness" text with more QUERY and EVALUATE/QUERY comments than the graduate students, a reflection of the greater difficulty some of them had with the exaggerated claims of that piece (e.g. "How are they going to do that? Where do they get the money?"). Overall, the "Workaholic" and "Bake-Off" texts, which both had narrative/descriptive structures, drew the most QUERY comments, and slightly more INFER comments, perhaps because these two texts told stories and left readers to draw conclusions. The "Oranges" text received the least INFER comments and evoked the most COMPARE KNOWLEDGE comments. It contained little in the way of a subtext for readers to detect, and its catalogue of information was a relatively strong stimulus to readers' memories.

Readers' Inferences of Writers' Aims

Having pointed to some patterns in readers' responses to the set of texts in this study, I will focus now on their responses to two ironic texts, "Workaholic" and "Fairness," showing places in the protocols where readers inferred the writers' aims.

The "Workaholic" text essentially tells a story without comment, leaving readers to make inferences and see the irony of the events. One of the graduate students, Katie, seemed to have no difficulty tuning in to the implications of this text as she read the opening:

He worked himself to death, finally and precisely, at 3:00 A.M. Sunday morning -- Gregor Sampser, I can't help but think of you. The obituary didn't say that, of course. It said that he died of a coronary thrombosis--I think that was it--but everyone among his friends and acquaintances knew it instantly. He was a perfect Type A -- O.K., so now I know that it's sort of - from a magazine or something like that - a perfect Type A - it's relatively recent, a workaholic, a classic, they said to each other and shook their heads--and thought for five or ten minutes about the way they lived. O.K., the implication there is that's all they they thought of--not for very long - um - Richard Corey (chuckles) and Edward Arlington - uh, Paul Simon -- Willie Loman.

While reading the opening lines, Katie has identified the kind of writing, interpreted a phrase, and filed the main character with some others she has stored away in memory. The key to her understanding of the whole text, though, is its tone, which she describes when she finishes reading the piece:

The tone here is important, because the cynical or wry tone, told from - third person, like a reporter-underlines and and interestingly - emphasizes the sort of um sterile, unfamiliar, cold - system in which we do operate as as individuals, or try to live as individuals. Several readers, both graduate students and freshmen, perceived irony in the text by recognizing the main characters as stereotypes. This recognition was sometimes prompted by a particular word, as in this excerpt from the protocol of Greta, a graduate student:

He is survived by his wife, Helen, forty-eight years old, a good woman of no particular marketable skills - now this is becoming rude to me, to list humans in terms of marketability - who worked in an office before marrying and mothering. He had, according to her daughter -- now this marketable, this one word sort of triggers to me that the writer, again this - using his skill to - bring out the stereotype to make it as extreme as possible, I think.

In recognizing the stereotypes, readers were recognizing that the writer had a particular angle or perspective on her

subject--that by presenting the characters as emblems she was passing unstated judgment on the situation she was describing.

To make sense of the "Workaholic" text, readers had to supply the missing commentary. To understand the "Fairness" text, they had to decide whether or not the writer meant what he had written--whether he was a misguided idealist or a cynic. Of all the texts in the study, this one gave readers the most difficulty and yielded the most interesting range of responses. Katie, the graduate student who detected the subtext of the "Workaholic" text so readily, had little trouble with the "Fairness" text either. About a quarter of the way through it, she remarks that it is presenting "all the things that the good society ought to do." Almost as an afterthought, she adds: "and then, of course, we all know that these things are so difficult to achieve." In this comment she declares herself to be an insider, wise to the writer's game. This kind of early insight was not a distinctive characteristic of the graduate students, however. One of the freshmen picked up the sarcastic tone after reading two sentences, and several graduate students did not decide that the text was tongue-in-cheek until they had finished reading it.

Case Study of a Reader Inferring Irony

The most interesting reading of the "Fairness" text was by Ulla, the freshman whose profile of comments on the texts reflected by far the least criticism (see Table 2), and whose method of reading was to pause from time to time and rephrase a passage into her own words.

Ulla evidently began reading the "Fairness" text with the assumption that it could be understood literally. She clung to this assumption, and until the eighth paragraph she was able to construct a version of the text that made sense literally, characterizing the author as a pacifist. However, in paragraph eight her model of a coherent text faces a serious challenge and we can see here the first signs of her uncertainty:

I don't understand, I'm getting a little stuck here, how a fair government um - could resolve issues, moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia - all those things because - it just - I don't see how you can resolve the differences. 'S always gonna be a conflict.

Ulla rereads the paragraph and then, still assuming that the author's argument must make sense literally, she interprets the paragraph to resolve the apparent contradiction. This is how she deals with the second sentence in the paragraph:

I guess what he's trying to say is that it's um, people's choice - and I think what he- what's going on here is he's saying it would prohibit all women, from beco-

treating it, being treated as sex objects only like primarily - a or ha- and having to suffer from rape or, you know here it says sexual brutality, but um, would respect the right of citizens to buy full so I guess, the peop- citizens have the right to buy full color p-pornography fea- fea- you know featuring these people, um with the consent, of those people who are being photographed. I would say I can understand it in that sense. So um, so I think when it says it prove- it prohibit, um, involuntary participation in these things but, consent from the, subjects - it, it would be, legal, uh uh it should be fair.

This passage shows a reader creating the kind of hypothetical scenarios that Flower, Hayes, and Swarts (1983) observed writers building to solve comprehension problems. Ulla's expectations about the text led her to perform interpretive back-flips, rationalizing the text in order to incorporate a new and apparently contradictory passage into the coherent model of author and argument she had been constructing.

Ulla continued this rationalization through paragraph eleven, at the end of which she remarks, "I don't, I still, like, I'm having some conflicts here, about how this can be done, but that's O.K. I guess it just means under ideal conditions." However, her faith in the logical sense of the surface text finally gives out, and as she finishes reading the piece she realizes the satire and revises her entire

understanding of the text. Here is the beginning of her final comment on the text:

You've gotta look at this thing without- it's just a joke here, the last, second to last paragraph, lines fifty-five through fifty-eight. I just, eh eh they're just jokes. I mean, this whole thing is just - you know I could- it starts out, you could understand part of it, you know this guy's being too idealistic but, this whole paper is just -I mean he, he, you know what I think, is um, that -- [shuffles paper] is what he's saying - is these, coming back to the beginning - it's the ho- just to tie it all up is - he's just saying that - that um- there's no way that we can even establish, a perfectly fair government . . .

Discussion

This pilot study examined the ways some skilled readers detect ironic subtexts in non-fiction prose. Due to the small number of subjects in the study and the nature of protocols as data, any conclusions must be drawn from the study cautiously. The study revealed what a particular group of readers did as they read aloud and commented on a particular set of texts. However, analysis of the data did suggest some patterns of response similar to those revealed by other studies of reading processes--patterns which may represent typical reading strategies among skilled readers in our society. These

patterns of response are summarized and discussed below.

Readers in this study engaged in two main reading activities--interpretation and evaluation. Aside from metastatements, about half the comments made by graduate students and freshmen were attempts to interpret or understand the texts. Readers interpreted by paraphrasing or translating passages into their own words, supplying missing details, and guessing at the overall purpose of the text. In their evaluative comments they argued with the texts, praised or criticized them, and presented their own views.

Most of the readers' interaction with the texts was local, addressing the meaning of words, phrases, sentences, and passages, while most of the rest of their comments related to the whole text, generalizing about its meaning. The remaining comments concerned tone, the manner of presenting ideas, and the writer's decisions about structure and local rhetorical features.

The freshmen in this study were able to use most of the same strategies as the graduate students, but they made fewer comments overall and a smaller variety. The graduate students devoted a higher percentage of their comments to rhetorical features, tone, and structure in the texts, suggesting greater awareness of rhetorical strategies. This might point to a developmental difference, but I suspect it was influenced more by the graduate students' training and experience as critical readers and teachers of writing. The freshmen also made a

smaller percentage of comparative comments, and the majority of these were with their own experiences, while the graduate students made more comparisons between the text they were reading and other texts. These differences, together with the fact that a greater proportion of the comments by freshmen referred to the content of local passages, suggest support for the conclusions reached by Scardamalia & Bereiter (1984)--that younger readers tend to focus on local, individual details in the text, while older readers make more macropropositions (interpretive comments addressing larger parts of the text). Scardamalia & Bereiter's subjects were twelve- and sixteen-year-olds, but the differences between the two age groups' reading strategies reflect some of the differences I noticed between my two groups of readers. Older readers, or readers with more years of education, appear to bring more knowledge to bear on texts and read with a wider field of vision.

While there were differences between the way graduate students and freshmen read the texts in this study, there were also marked differences between the reading signatures or stances of individual readers. For instance, one of the freshmen, Ulla, aimed primarily to interpret the texts without taking issue with them, while another freshman, Lynn, had a much more evaluative stance, arguing frequently with the texts.

Interpretation and evaluation would appear to be quite different activities, the one focusing on meaning, the other

on worth, and in the protocols of Lynn and Ulla they were nearly always easily distinguishable; but interpretation and evaluation are closely related activities which frequently overlap. When coding the protocols, it was sometimes hard to decide which was the dominant purpose of a comment. Take for example a comment by Tim, one of the graduate students, as he finished reading a sentence in the "Fairness" text: "It would make all our homes and streets safe from crime without ever wrongly convicting anyone or overcrowding our prisons. It's the candy shop." In one sense, this remark interprets the sentence he has just read, drawing a conclusion about its meaning, and indeed it was coded as an inference. Yet the remark may also be evaluative, implying that the writer is proposing a childish, simplistic view of an ideal society. It is not clear from the comment whether Tim had seen the ironic subtext at this point in the reading. This comment may have been part of his realization that the author was being ironic.

The "candy shop" comment is also a metaphor, which illustrates the close relationship between interpretation, evaluation, and comparison. Arguably, all comments reacting to text can be seen as forms of comparison: readers draw parallels between the texts and their prior knowledge or reading experience; they compose comparable versions of the texts in their own words by paraphrasing or summarizing them; they judge the texts by comparing them with their own values and beliefs; and they challenge the texts with queries when

they are unable to make a satisfactory comparison. These strategies of comparison suggest that reading may be seen as an attempt to find a place for the text in the reader's system of knowledge and values. As Goodman (1984) has observed, reading may be described in Piagetian terms as a process of assimilation and accommodation. As they try to assimilate or make sense of a text, readers modify it, if necessary, by paraphrasing or summarizing, converting it into an acceptable form. Queries and evaluative comments result from failures to assimilate or digest the text. Readers fail to assimilate text either when they do not understand it or when they understand it but find it unacceptable. In addition to assimilating the text, readers may need to accommodate it by changing their prior knowledge and beliefs. In other words, to understand and accept a text, readers often have to modify both the text and their expectations of it, a process of negotiation which involves querying, inferring, evaluating, and comparing.

Readers in this study detected irony, or the presence of a subtext, by recognizing clues in particular features of the text--a humorous or sarcastic tone in a passage, or the presence of stereotypical characters, for instance. Recognizing these clues led them to revise their schema for the text--the framework they had constructed to make sense of it. For some readers this was a quick and easy process; for others, it was a harder decision. The readers who debated at

some length whether the text was ironic appeared to have expected a literal text and were reluctant to give up this way of reading it. When Ulla, a freshman, read the "Fairness" text, she read it literally. She defended her initial schema (the text as a pacifist manifesto) for as long as she was able, interpreting each new paragraph to fit this schema. She abandoned the schema, finally, when she recognized clues to irony at the end of the text, and concluded her reading with a new schema (the text as a satire of the political system).

This study suggests some of the ways readers infer irony in texts, and it raises a number of questions for further research. For instance, we might ask how young children develop a schema for irony. Audience awareness and its development in writers is currently the focus of considerable research and discussion, but we should also study the development of "author awareness" in readers. When do children first learn to distinguish a writer's overt and implied stances? Is this ability linked to age, or does it depend more on the nature and experience of the individual? What roles do education and cultural background play in developing the ability to recognize ironic discourse?

Kenneth Goodman (1984) and Frank Smith (1983) are among the reading specialists who have characterized reading as an active process of creating meaning from texts. When writers conceal their aims behind an ironic stance and depend on readers' inferences, this active participation in the process

of making meaning becomes even more crucial to the reader's understanding of the text. Ironic discourse, then, should be an important subject for further studies of interactions between readers and writers.

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Appendix

"Fairness" text

1. One of our major political parties promises to make "fairness" the watchword of the 1984 election. This has set me to thinking what a perfectly fair government would be like.
2. A fair government would ensure that we can consume the highest quality products at the lowest prices, while outlawing all industrial pollution and environmental side effects. It would guarantee full employment at home, while allowing us the pick of foreign goods at fair-trade prices. It would promise us all the electricity, coal, oil, gas and long-distance phone calls we could want in the foreseeable future--without any increase of cost, of course. All coal and oil leases granted by former Interior Secretary James G. Watt would be revoked, the plants torn down and their cost refunded to honest people.
3. It would make our homes and streets safe from crime, without ever wrongly convicting anyone or overcrowding our prisons.
4. It would pay for all the medical attention or disability payments we think we deserve, and for which no one would ever be unjustly ruled ineligible. Any over-zealous bureaucrat who did deny a deserving citizen his benefits would be interviewed by Mike Wallace for the entire length of "60 Minutes."
5. A fair government would make sure that all retirement benefits stay a step ahead of inflation, even if inflation should head into the 20% range or higher. Concurrently, it

would guarantee that young workers won't have to pay crippling payroll taxes to support retirement systems.

6. It would allow us to sue anyone we want, anytime we want, for any amount we want--and still enjoy the advantages of a dynamic, progressive society, not one that is bogged down with overly cautious procedures, struggling to support a huge, costly, nonproductive population of lawyers.

7. It would bring all American troops home from everywhere, and dismantle all American nuclear weapons, without resulting in any hazard to American freedom. It would slash appropriations for all new weapons, and would convert Communist and other extremist movements to benign pacifism by force of example. An engraving of the Mahatma Gandhi would replace George Washington on all \$1 bills. Alarmist reactionaries like Alexander Solzhenitsyn and William F. Buckley Jr. would be sent to re-education camps in Alaska as a sign of good faith.

8. A fair government would resolve all differences between Americans on subtle moral issues like abortion, euthanasia, reverse discrimination, school prayer and the power of government to regulate religion through selective taxation, without sanctifying "American" values to the point of establishing a state religion. It would prohibit women and children from being treated as sex objects or becoming the victims of sexual brutality, yet would respect the right of citizens to buy full-color pornography featuring women,

children, men--whatever their preference. It would invent a fairer process than competition and the market system for ensuring that people in comparable jobs get equal pay. It also would possess the wisdom of Solomon for deciding which jobs are "comparable," and for making sure all promotions are always based on genuine merit.

9. A fair government would guarantee the ultimate grandfather clause: Any farmer or industrial worker who lost his job because of Reaganomics will be given it back, with apologies. The rich would have a retroactive surcharge placed on their incomes for the last four years.

10. It would provide for every American three nourishing meals a day. It would guarantee a clean, safe, private place of residence for everyone, and also affordable transportation to the safest, cleanest, fairest and best-paying workplaces in the world. Immigration would not be restricted, and anyone who can get here would be entitled to the same privileges of citizenship as native-born Americans.

11. A fair government would guarantee that American students learn as much as those in other lands, without having to work so hard. Teachers would be paid first thing every morning, and those who do well would get paid again at lunchtime and before they go home at night.

12. All in all, I think this list is a modest compendium of what a fair government should do. I intend to vote for the first candidate who can make it come to pass.

Table 1
Functions and Subjects of Comments Made by
Graduate Students and Freshmen

Function	Graduate Students		Freshmen	
	Total	%	Total	%
QUERY	71	10.6	46	9.9
OBSERVE	44	6.6	9	1.9
PREDICT	11	1.6	8	1.7
INFER	172	25.7	160	34.5
INFER/QUERY	19	2.8	10	2.2
EVALUATE	199	29.7	136	29.4
EVALUATE/QUERY	12	1.8	15	3.2
COMPARE TEXT (CT)	53	7.9	9	1.9
EVALUATE/CT	15	2.2	2	0.4
COMPARE KNOWLEDGE (CK)	67	10.0	68	14.7
EVALUATE/CK	<u>6</u>	<u>0.9</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Total	669	99.8	463	99.8
Subject				
PASSAGE CONTENT	340	50.8	325	70.2
RHETORICAL FEATURE	71	10.6	29	6.3
TONE	70	10.6	22	4.7
STRUCTURE	50	7.5	15	3.2
WHOLE TEXT	132	19.7	73	15.8
AUTHOR	<u>6</u>	<u>0.9</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Total	669	100.0	463	100.2

Table 2
Incidence of Comments by Individual Readers

Function	Graduate students			Freshmen		
	Katie	Tim	Greta	Liz	Ulla	Penny
QUERY	11	26	34	22	14	10
OBSERVE	20	13	11	7	1	1
PREDICT	8	3	-	3	-	5
INFER	64	58	50	39	62	59
INFER/QUERY	4	8	7	5	2	3
EVALUATE	74	60	65	79	10	47
EVALUATE/QUERY	-	6	6	8	6	1
COMPARE TEXT (CT)	27	11	15	2	5	2
EVALUATE/CT	7	4	4	-	-	2
COMPARE KNOWLEDGE (CK)	16	16	35	41	12	15
EVALUATE/CK	-	1	5	-	-	-

Table 3

Incidence of Comment Functions for Individual Texts

Function	Texts									
	"Workaholic"		"Housewife"		"Oranges"		"Fairness"		"Bake-Off"	
	Grad.	Fresh.	Grad.	Fresh.	Grad.	Fresh.	Grad.	Fresh.	Grad.	Fresh.
QUERY	22	8	15	3	12	6	7	15	15	14
OBSERVE	10	2	10	-	11	3	1	2	4	2
PREDICT	1	2	6	-	1	3	1	2	2	1
INFER	42	44	34	24	24	25	39	36	33	31
INFER/QUERY	8	5	-	-	7	-	-	3	4	2
EVALUATE	30	15	50	41	26	16	61	41	32	23
EVALUATE/QUERY	2	-	3	1	-	-	5	13	2	1
COMPARE TEXT (CT)	13	1	6	1	7	-	7	3	20	4
EVALUATE/CT	2	1	6	-	3	-	1	-	3	1
COMPARE KNOWLEDGE (CK)	20	7	3	9	24	21	10	9	10	22
EVALUATE/CK	1	-	3	-	-	-	2	-	-	-